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We *had* an Excuse for Being Less than we Should Be



Except for Saint Francis ...

We *had* an excuse ... except for Saint Francis ... and Saint Clare. And now we are without one.

"I am only a man ... only a woman. What can you expect of me?"

Catholics, all Christians really, are not wanting in belief ... only in courage: the courage required to relinquish our own practical designs, our deep-seated pragmatism that orders means to ends. But because our *ends* are many, and not one – *God* – they are essentially outside of God, and this a rather unsatisfactory state of affairs ... one which does not portend well.

Despite our most earnest profession of faith, we still believe – or at least *act* as if we believe – that it is *we*, and not God, who know what is best for us, and how best to achieve it – I mean, in matters really *practical* like acquiring money, substance, shelter, building barns against the anticipated year of famine. We all do it in one way or another. Well, at least most of us.

Matters of a material sort, after all, *are* the province of man, yes? – and who is most competent to judge of such matters if not man? We render to God what is God's – things spiritual and the like that we presume can be indefinitely deferred before being brought to account – and to man what is man's, things material, quotidian to be sure, but terribly pragmatic no less, and very likely due today.

Now, this appears entirely satisfactory, well proportioned and wise, and we are quite comfortable with it ... in fact, if we are really adept, we can even attenuate that nagging sense of disproportion between what we *are in fact doing* and what we really *know we should be doing* – that is to say, what *God* would have us do.

In any event, we achieve the ends we have set before us, and if there is any residual guilt arising out of this nagging sense of disproportion, we are nevertheless confident that time will eradicate its remembrance, and we shall then have both – the end we desired, and freedom from the sting of conscience that initially accompanied it.

In effect, we are saying that we will start anew – *once* we have achieved our end. And, of course, we never do: we acknowledge that our behavior has its consequences in eternity, but we still are not persuaded to do, or in retrospect, to have done, otherwise.

The reason for this, I think, is quite simple: we presume much. Of time, mortality, life, death – but mostly we presume upon God; upon His understanding our frailty (which, for our part, we do little to rehabilitate) and, of course, upon His mercy, given His understanding of our irremediable and largely incorrigible condition.

The Problem ...

There *is* a terribly vexing problem, however, and it is this: *Saint Francis*. And *Saint Clare*.

Alas ... Saints Francis and Clare! *Except for them*, we had an excuse ...

Let us be unsparing in articulating the problem, which is a very real one. For the moment let us look at the one, Francis, for the one is really the other: two peas in a pod that is really a thistle.

Unlike Christ, Who was like us in every way except sin, Saint Francis, who was like *Christ* – more like Christ than any man who has ever lived – *was like us in every way*.

With Christ we are inclined to say, "Ah, yes, but He was God also!"

We have no such excuse before the example of Saint Francis.

But Saint Francis, we protest, was clearly the beneficiary of *extraordinary grace*, and we are not.

I do not think that such an assessment does Saint Francis justice –certainly it does God no justice.

We are scandalized by Saint Francis, mortified by Saint Clare. Why?

Deprived of excuses

Because they deprive us of our excuses.

Saint Francis did the unthinkable, the inexcusable: he took Christ at His word. Literally. No equivocating, no scholarly hermeneutics, no convenient interpolation, nothing of casuistry, no middle way – in fact, no accommodating Christ to the world whatever – on the other hand, he possessed a passionate desire to bring the *world* to Christ.

Saint Francis had, in short, the courage to act with conviction upon the words, the promises, of Christ – the courage to relinquish the pragmatic promptings of his own will in deference to a wisdom he believed far greater than his own. In a word, Saint Francis submitted himself to God.

As we said earlier, we are not lacking in faith – but faith, in our terribly practical affairs, somehow does not suffice and fails to motivate us in and of itself. We may believe something completely, absolutely, without reservation – *and still fail to have the courage to act upon it.*

We may, for example, and with good warrant, believe that the tensile strength of a steel cable one quarter inch in diameter is capable of suspending 10,000 pounds with a safety ratio of 3:1. What is more, it has been scientifically tested, quality assured, and certified as such. We may in fact, have repeatedly observed such a cable holding 10,000 pounds. Even 30,000 pounds.

And yet, despite the evidence (which, of course, faith does not possess), few of us would have the courage to allow ourselves to be suspended by so narrow a cable 1000 feet above the ground. Our safety would be virtually certain, but it would no less be insufficient.

In other words, generally speaking, there is little commensurability between faith, understood as belief, and the courage to act upon it.

If faith is to be motivated, something greater than faith itself is required, something less epistemic, less connected with the head and more connected with the heart.

We find it in Francis not because Francis found it, but because he lived it. Because Clare lived it.

We can live it, too. Their lives show us this. It is great wisdom to be a great fool for Christ.

In the end, I think that we will find that if we are lacking courage – it is because we are lacking love. And perhaps this, after all, is what the Evangelist Saint John means when he says that "perfect love drives out all fear."

Only perfect love, then, engenders perfect courage.

Do not be discouraged, children. *Be inspired.* You have *more* than they did ... for they have gone before you.



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